

---

---

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case Nos. 11-19

### Recorder of Deeds Building (Exterior and Interior)

515 D Street NW  
Square 489, Lot 802

Meeting Date: December 19, 2019  
Applicants: DC Preservation League  
Affected ANC: 2C

---

---

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Recorder of Deeds Building (Exterior and Interior) at 515 D Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance with a period of significance from 1943 to 1945.



### Background

Designed by the Municipal Architect's Office under Nathan C. Wyeth, the Recorder of Deeds building at 515 D Street NW was constructed as part of the city's long-planned and only partially realized "Municipal Center." The Municipal Center was a complex of city judicial and administrative buildings planned for Judiciary Square and the squares to its immediate south. The Administrative Building at 300 Indiana Avenue NW, now known as the Municipal Center building (1941), was the first new building in the complex to be constructed; it was designed in a stripped classical style that distinguished itself from but harmonized with the Greek Revival-style Old City Hall building on the square. The D.C. Library Annex at 499 Pennsylvania Avenue (now demolished) and the Recorder of Deeds, both built 1940-1943, followed in a stripped classical aesthetic echoing that of the Municipal Center building. The rest of the complex was

not built as planned; however, in 1949-51, the United States Courthouse for the District of Columbia was erected on the site of one of the proposed Municipal Center buildings in a similar stripped classical vein. In 1977-78, the D.C. Superior Court (H. Carl Moultrie Courthouse of the District of Columbia) building was built, essentially completing the complex if not stylistically, at least in terms of massing and materials.

The Recorder of Deeds building is the first and only purpose-built building to house the city's Office of the Recorder of Deeds. The position of Recorder of Deeds dates to 1863 when Congress created it, but was formalized in 1869, when Congress detailed the functions of the position and instituted a fee system to support a recorder's office and staff. As stipulated by Congress, the position of the Recorder of Deeds was to be appointed by the president and subject to Senate confirmation in the manner of a cabinet-level appointment. The recorder was responsible for registering, certifying and filing all deeds, mortgages, conveyances, quit claims, powers of attorney, leases, trust, incorporations, contracts, covenants, agreements, and similar documents. The recorder's office occupied rooms in the Old City Hall building, moving around the building and its wings and in nearby rented space over the decades. From the outset, recorders lobbied for a consolidated and fireproof space; however, until the New Deal, such requests were ignored. Then, on July 13, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed a bill allowing the District to receive a Public Works Administration loan to fund a recorder's building. Two months later, the president attended a ground-breaking ceremony, though designs for the building were not completed until early 1941 and construction was not completed until 1943 due to World War II budget and material shortages. As designed by the Office of Municipal Architect under Nathan Wyeth, the smooth-cut limestone clad building reflected an austere stripped classical style on the exterior but offered warm wood and marble-paneled rooms on the interior along with an impressive array of richly painted wall murals and other art. Seven different murals, painted by seven different artists commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art, depicted subjects which "reflected the contribution of the Negro to the American nation." This overarching theme, established by the then Recorder of Deeds, Dr. William Thompkins, was in keeping with the history of the Office of the Recorder of Deeds itself.

## **History**

With the brief exception of the Reconstruction era, a system of racial discrimination and segregation restricted the appointment of African Americans to federal, state, and municipal positions until after World War II. The position of the Recorder of Deeds in D.C. proved to be somewhat of an exception when, in 1881, James Garfield appointed Frederick Douglass to the position. Douglass was the first African American to hold the prestigious position, but he was not the first black employee. Three years earlier, Douglass's predecessor, General George A. Sheridan of Louisiana had hired copyist Henrietta Vinton Davis, making her the first African American employee of the office. In 1886, Douglass resigned his position to make way for James C. Matthews, an African American lawyer and New York democrat, appointed by President Grover Cleveland. Despite a barrage of opposition that sprung from the appointment due to Matthews' race and to the fact that he was not a city resident, Cleveland did not concede, as Cleveland "desired in this way to tender just recognition and good faith toward our colored fellow citizen," and Matthews became the second African American Recorder of Deeds. The appointments of Douglass and Matthews thus established a tradition whereby the president appointed African Americans to the prestigious and highly remunerated position. This tradition came to a halt from 1916 to 1922 under Woodrow Wilson but resumed under Warren G.

Harding. While seemingly laudable, the tradition attracted opposition and widespread attention nationwide. As noted by the African American community, such a highly sought-after position clearly highlighted the limited opportunities for African Americans in public office.

Dr. William J. Thompkins, recorder from 1934 to 1944, and a determined advocate for the office, was successful in converting the pleas for a building to house the recorder's office into a new building that would be part of the Municipal Center complex. More notably, Thompkins was responsible for establishing the theme of the murals and researching and defining the specific subjects that were then commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art. Thompkins had already introduced a program of art into the office at 412 D Street when in 1936 he arranged to have artists paint portraits of his ten African American and two white predecessors through the Works Progress Administration. For the seven murals, Thompkins identified important historical events in which African Americans played critical and heroic roles. Two of the seven murals, "Frederick Douglass Imploring President Lincoln" and "Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia" are specifically associated with the District, while the others depict African Americans in national patriotic struggles outside the District. The nomination provides a list, description and photographs of each of the murals.

Construction of the building was completed in 1943, final installation of the murals took place in 1944, and in 1945, a plaque with a relief depicting President Roosevelt in profile was formally dedicated inside the building. The plaque, "The Four Freedoms," sculpted by African American sculptor Dr. Selma Burke, was apparently commissioned for the building before Roosevelt's death.

### **Evaluation**

The Recorder of Deeds Building meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (Events), B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism), E (Artistry) and F (Creative Masters). The building meets Criteria A and B as the site of events associated with historical periods, social movements, achievements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage, culture and development of the District. Specifically, the building, which is associated with the appointments of African Americans to the position of Recorder, is a symbol of national achievement of African Americans, while it simultaneously represents the African American struggle for equal rights. Similarly, the arts program which is integral to the building and this achievement, was conceived by African American Recorder William Thompkins and celebrates the contribution of African Americans to the nation.

The building meets Designation Criterion D as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and is an expression of urban planning and design. Namely, the building was built as part of the Municipal Center and designed in a stripped classical style complementary to the other buildings making up the complex. The inclusion of the Recorder of Deeds building within the complex represents the recognized importance of the Office to the development of the city.

The building meets Designation Criterion E because it possesses high artistic value that contributes significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District. In particular, the interior murals are highly indicative of the New Deal-era public arts programs and are an excellent representation stylistically of such public art.

The building meets Designation Criterion F because it represents a notable work of design undertaken by the D.C. Office of the Municipal Architect under Nathan Wyeth. Although perhaps not the most sophisticated example of Wyeth's stripped classical building designs, the building is an important example of the work of the office during his tenure.

For the above reasons, the Recorder of Deeds Building also meets National Register Criteria A (Events) and C (Architecture).

### **Boundaries**

The landmark boundaries include the building, its lot, and specified interior spaces as shown on a colorized floor plan included as an attachment to this report. The designated interior spaces include the first floor, exclusive of the stairwell, elevators, and delivery room; the second-floor library and Office of the Recorder. Significant features include the seven wall murals, the Selma Burke bas relief, marble and wood wall paneling, terrazzo and parquet flooring, and original ceiling finishes.

*Other works of art, such as the portrait paintings, are significant to the history of the office, but as movable objects, HPO does not recommend that they be part of the interior designation. However, it is appropriate for the Board to recognize them as important heritage assets to the District of Columbia.*

### **Period of significance**

The Period of Significance extends from 1943 when construction of the building was completed and 1945 when the "The Four Freedoms" plaque was dedicated.

### **Integrity**

The Recorder of Deeds Building retains high integrity of location, setting, design, materials, and workmanship with only minor alterations, along with a palpable sense of time, place and association.

